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ABSTRACT

There are three ways by which the social science research community can influence government decision makers. First, researchers need to understand the scope and limitations of governmental agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission. Second, objective research rather than biased "advocacy research" should be conducted. Finally, the research community should broaden its intellectual horizon to include new areas of concern. (CH)

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A CALL FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING, GREATER OBJECTIVITY, AND WIDER VISTAS[1]

Our moderator has asked me to comment on ways in which the social science research community might more effectively influence the Commission decision-making process.

Following are some random thoughts on the subject. They are by no means intended to be definitive. It is hoped, in fact, that during the Conference other ways to accomplish this same objective will be found.

Social scientists, along with other researchers, want to reach and influence governmental policy-makers. The purpose of this brief paper is to suggest three ways by which the research community can better accomplish that objective of influencing agency decision-makers. To begin with, researchers need to better understand the agency, its scope of authority and regulatory constraints. Secondly, too many researchers engage in what I

1/ The ideas and opinions expressed herein are the views of the author and not those of the Office of Plans and Policy or any other component of the Federal Communications Commission.

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characterize as "advocacy research" and seemingly ignore the kind of objective, scholarly investigation traditionally associated with the research community. Finally, the research community should broaden its intellectual horizon to include new areas of social concern.

Most of us are aware that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is an independent federal regulatory agency created by Congress and charged with regulating interstate and foreign communication by means of radio, television, wire, cable, and satellite. Among other powers recited in the Communications Act, the Commission's decision-making in these areas includes full authority to "study new uses for radio, provide for experimental uses of frequencies, and generally encourage the larger and more effective use of radio in the public interest." That specific language of the Act is more than occasionally used to support various proposals for agency action. I wonder, however, to what extent the research community is aware of the limited scope of the agency's authority to "study new uses for radio?" Regrettably, more than a few of the studies and proposals I have reviewed seem to show little awareness that the Commission's powers are limited severely by other portions of the Communications Act.

For example, social science research often examines the behavioral effects of television as a socializing agent, with emphasis in the form of research suggestions focusing on programming and advertising practices. Suggestions in the area of programming, however, invariably raise more problems than solutions. Several of the research proposals I have personally reviewed appear not to recognize that broadcast licensees, although public trustees with particular obligations to serve their listeners and viewers, are also entitled to much the same freedom from governmental censorship as the print media.

The First Amendment and Section 326 of the Communications Act expressly prohibit the FCC from censoring or otherwise interferring with broadcast matter, and from taking any action that would encroach upon the right of free speech by broadcast licensees. The FCC is not the national arbiter of public taste. Nor can it tell broadcasters or viewers what programs are "good" or "bad" -- what they may watch and what they may not watch. People express concern about Orwell's 1984 and, yet, some believe that the government should use its power to save the country. One basic fear is that this federal watch-dog, once unleashed, may turn on its master. Governmental censorship for the benefit

of society can be just as dangerous as governmental censorship for the benefit of demogogues.

Nevertheless, it is a popular misconception that the FCC can take affirmative steps to, among other things, make qualitative judgments about television programming, force the removal of so-called "offensive" programs, and compel licensees to cover particular issues directed toward particular audiences. It is inconceivable to me that anyone would want seven governmental officials deciding what programs are and are not appropriate for public consumption. For the federal government -- particularly a regulatory agency -- to be the principal or guiding research force in such a sensitive area is, at best, a questionable practice.

In spite of these obvious limitations on the scope of Commission power to become involved in programming matters, some members of the research community persist in exploring the effects of television as an agent for social good or evil, concluding that intervention by the federal government can transform a programming "wasteland" into a fertile field of nothing but "Adams Chronicles," "The Incredible Machine," "Walt Disney," and Aaron Copland leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Some believe that, for the good of society, the FCC should become the Federal watch-dog of so-called "acceptable programming." Even if social science research should prove, however, that seeing Cher's navel or Kojak's lollipop fosters undesirable behavior, the FCC cannot act as program director -- even in the guise of benefiting society. Research concerning the societal impact of violence and sex is important and necessary. In the area of programming, however, the influenced decision-makers should be industry, educators, the public, and Congress -- not the FCC.

Similar confusion about the extent of FCC authority exists where broadcast advertising is concerned. In the area of advertising it is the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), not the Federal Communications Commission, which has the primary responsibility for determining whether advertising is deceptive, harmful or misleading, and for taking appropriate action against the sponsors of such material. The FCC does hold broadcast licensees responsible for exercising reasonable diligence to prevent the use of their facilities for false, deceptive or misleading advertising, and takes cognizance of FTC findings in this regard. Simply stated, however, in the

area of programming the FCC does not censor; and in the area of advertising, it does not determine what is harmful or misleading.

My point in reciting these homely examples is not to undermine the value of such research, but only to urge that those who expect the government to take some course of action be aware fully of the limits of its statutory authority. Researchers must consider the authoritative limits and the areas of agency responsibility when developing research topics, objectives, and methods of implementation if they are to have any reasonable expectation that their efforts will have an impact on decision-making.

In addition to urging greater understanding on the part of the research community with the scope of agency authority, it is difficult to over-emphasize how important the independent voice of research can be to informed decision-making. Too often, agencies rely solely on the viewpoint of interested parties, rather than disinterested and informed research/observers offering an independent judgment. By independent, however, I do not mean "advocacy research."

There must be a constant vigil against imposing personal views on society by supplying the agency with

predetermined solutions to dimly perceived problems. Researchers are obligated to explore all facets of a problem area and not dwell on personally preconceived notions. Everyone has preconceptions, biases if you will. In preparing research proposals, it is the obligation of all researchers to admit to them and consciously compensate for them in order to present a balanced, honest, complete evaluation of the issues for examination. Moreover, the research community must guard against identifying problems that do not exist. Proposing solutions in search of problems is neither a service to the policy-maker and society, nor a credit to the research community.

It is the function of research to identify problem areas and provide policy-makers with data from which to draw conclusions. The researcher can identify a problem, study it in depth, gather data, and explore a variety of possible actions. Several alternatives or options should be suggested. When the avenues of action become one-way streets to a solution, the researcher's usefulness is lessened. The policy-maker needs a variety of options for evaluation and exploration. By selecting or favoring one solution over others, the researcher puts himself in the role of policy-maker by dictating the

solution to an identified problem. When each expert calls upon his own particular area of expertise, however, society is well served.

There is, in addition, value in social scientists entering new areas of communications research. Present social science research focuses on broadcast and cable television, perhaps because they are controversial and so-called "glamour" issues. Not all of society's problems, however, involve programming, advertising, or cable expansion and "blue sky" issues.

Newspapers, the trade press, and country/western records have, for example, made clear that CB (Citizens Band Radio) is a communications issue of profound national significance. The FCC is faced with four million CB licensees increasing at a rate of over one-half million a month, and there is no current indication of a significant reduction in the near future. It is more likely, in fact, that the increase will continue at this unprecedented rate. In addition to congestion and the improper use of assigned frequencies by some CB users, there are license processing problems, interference problems, and enforcement problems to name just a few.

All of these seemingly technical areas have social science implications, yet, the area is seriously deficient in social science research. What information could the social scientist provide to help the Commission in the decision-making process in such areas as citizens band radio, telemedicine, land mobile radio, electronic funds transfer, and the relationship between computers and communications services? Social science researchers should consider areas of study other than the so-called "sexy" areas of cable, advertising, and programming.

For social science research to more effectively influence the decision-making process, more ways to improve the present situation must be considered. When researchers and policy-makers meet together to explore the strengths and weaknesses existing today, effectiveness may be improved tomorrow. By working to make things better, we not only help each other but, more importantly, we jointly contribute to better informed policy decisions.